

Hepatitis C Fact Sheet

What is hepatitis C?

“Hepatitis” means inflammation of the liver. The liver is a vital organ that processes nutrients, filters the blood, and fights infections. When the liver is inflamed or damaged, its function can be affected. Hepatitis C is a disease caused by the hepatitis C virus which results in infection of the liver. Hepatitis C is a contagious liver disease that ranges in severity from a mild illness lasting a few weeks to a serious, lifelong illness that attacks the liver. It results from infection with the hepatitis C virus (HCV), which is spread primarily through contact with the blood of an infected person. Hepatitis C can be either “acute” or “chronic.”

Acute hepatitis C virus infection is a short-term illness that occurs within the first 6 months after someone is exposed to the hepatitis C virus. 15-25% of people who are infected with hepatitis C will resolve the infection on their own. For most people, (approximately 75-85%) acute infection leads to chronic infection.

Chronic hepatitis C virus infection is a long-term illness that occurs when the hepatitis C virus remains in a person’s body. Hepatitis C virus infection can last a lifetime and lead to serious liver problems, including cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) or liver cancer.

Who is at risk for hepatitis C?

Anyone can get hepatitis C, but some people are at increased risk for hepatitis C, including

- Current injection drug users (currently the most common way hepatitis C virus is spread in the United States)
- Past injection drug users, including those who injected only one time or many years ago
- Recipients of donated blood, blood products, and organs (once a common means of transmission but now rare in the United States since blood screening became available in 1992)
- People who received a blood product for clotting problems made before 1987
- CDC reports people born between 1945-1965 (the baby boomer generation) are 5 times more likely to have hepatitis C than other adults
- Hemodialysis patients or persons who spent many years on dialysis for kidney failure
- People who received body piercing or tattoos done with non-sterile instruments
- People with known exposures to the hepatitis C virus, such as
 - Health care workers injured by needle sticks
 - Recipients of blood or organs from a donor who tested positive for the hepatitis C virus
- HIV-infected persons
- Children born to mothers infected with the hepatitis C virus

How is the virus spread?

Hepatitis C is spread when blood from a person infected with the hepatitis C virus enters the body of someone who is not infected. Contaminated needles and syringes are a source of spread among IV drug users. The role of person-to-person contact and sexual activity in the spread of this disease is unclear. While spread may occur by these routes, it is less frequent than with the hepatitis B virus. Hepatitis C virus is NOT spread through casual contact or in typical school, office, or food service settings. It is NOT spread by coughing, sneezing, or drinking out of the same glass.

Can you get hepatitis C by getting a tattoo or piercing?

A few major research studies have not shown hepatitis C to be spread through licensed, commercial tattooing facilities. However, transmission of hepatitis C (and other infectious diseases) is possible when poor infection-control practices are used during tattooing or piercing. Body art is becoming increasingly popular in the United States, and unregulated tattooing and piercing are known to occur in prisons and other informal or unregulated settings.

Can hepatitis C be spread within a household?

Yes, but this does not occur very often. If hepatitis C virus is spread within a household, it is most likely a result of direct, through-the-skin exposure to the blood of an infected household member.

What is the risk of a pregnant woman passing hepatitis C to her baby?

Hepatitis C is rarely passed from a pregnant woman to her baby. About 4 of every 100 infants born to mothers with hepatitis C become infected with the virus. However, the risk becomes greater if the mother has both HIV infection and hepatitis C.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms develop slowly and may include loss of appetite, stomach pain, nausea, vomiting. Jaundice (yellowing of the skin or whites of the eyes) does not occur as commonly with hepatitis C as it does with hepatitis B. The severity of the illness can range from no symptoms to fatal cases (rare). Long-term infection is common. Liver disease may result from long-term infection, but the illness more often improves after two to three years. People who have a long term infection may or may not have symptoms. People who do not have symptoms can spread disease.

How soon do the symptoms appear?

Symptoms commonly appear within six to nine weeks. However, they can occur as soon as two weeks and as long as six months after infection. However, many people infected with the hepatitis C virus do not develop symptoms.

Is it possible to have hepatitis C and not know it?

Yes, many people who are infected with the hepatitis C virus do not know they are infected because they do not look or feel sick.

How long can an infected person spread the virus?

Infected people may spread the virus indefinitely.

How is hepatitis C diagnosed?

Hepatitis C is diagnosed based on symptoms and blood tests. Often, symptoms are not present but there is a suspected exposure. A positive blood test for hepatitis C virus antibody can mean any of the following:

1. Current or acute infection - This diagnosis is usually made if a person has signs and symptoms of liver disease, blood tests showing abnormal liver function, and negative tests for hepatitis A and B.
2. Chronic carrier - A chronic carrier is a person who was infected more than 6 months prior to the positive antibody blood test. The carrier does not have signs or symptoms of liver disease although there may be abnormal liver function tests. The carrier can transmit the virus to others. Over time the virus may cause liver damage, carriers should be followed closely by a physician. If there is evidence of progressive liver damage, the patient should be referred to a doctor specializing in the treatment of liver disease.
3. Immunity - The person was infected with hepatitis C in the past but has cleared the virus from their body. The person has a positive hepatitis C antibody test, no signs or symptoms of liver disease, and normal liver function tests. The immune person cannot spread hepatitis C to anyone else, and the antibodies protect them from infection in the future.
4. False Positive Test - The blood test is not 100% accurate. Rarely, the test is positive even though the person has never been infected with hepatitis C. There is no evidence of liver disease. Repeat hepatitis C antibody tests may be negative.

How good is the blood test?

The hepatitis C test used by blood donation centers is only a screening test to eliminate hepatitis C virus from the nation's blood and plasma supply. Individuals who test positive on the hepatitis C virus antibody test should be retested using the RIBA hepatitis C test or testing for hepatitis C virus using PCR technology. These tests cannot determine whether the disease is acute or chronic.

How can hepatitis C be prevented?

According to CDC, in order to reduce the risk of becoming infected with the hepatitis C virus:

- Do not share needles or other equipment to inject cosmetic substances, drugs or steroids.
- Do not use personal items that may have come into contact with an infected person's blood, such as razors, nail clippers, toothbrushes, or glucose monitors.
- Do not get tattoos or body piercings from an unlicensed facility or in an informal setting.

How is acute hepatitis C treated?

There is no medication available to treat acute hepatitis C infection. Doctors usually recommend rest, adequate nutrition, and fluids.

How is chronic hepatitis C treated?

Each person should discuss treatment options with a doctor who specializes in treating hepatitis. This can include internists, family practitioners, infectious disease doctors, gastroenterologists or hepatologists (liver specialists). People with chronic hepatitis C should be monitored regularly for signs of liver disease and evaluated for treatment. The treatment most often used for hepatitis C is a combination of two medicines, interferon and ribavirin. Protease inhibitors have been recently approved as a new medication for hepatitis C treatment to be used in combination with interferon and ribavirin. However, not every person with chronic hepatitis C needs or will benefit from treatment. In addition, the drugs may cause serious side effects in some patients. Contact your health care provider for further treatment information.

Is it possible to get over hepatitis C?

Yes, approximately 15%-25% of people who get hepatitis C will clear the virus from their bodies without treatment and will not develop chronic infection. Experts do not fully understand why this happens for some people.

What can a person with chronic hepatitis C do to take care of his or her liver?

People with chronic hepatitis C should be monitored regularly by a medical provider. They should avoid alcohol because it can cause additional liver damage. They also should check with a health professional before taking any prescription pills, supplements, or over-the-counter medications, as these can potentially damage the liver. If liver damage is present, a person should check with his or her doctor about getting vaccinated against hepatitis A and hepatitis B.

Is there a vaccine that can prevent hepatitis C?

No, there is currently no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C.

What is HIV and hepatitis C virus co-infection?

HIV and hepatitis C virus co-infection refers to being infected with both HIV and the hepatitis C virus. Co-infection is more common in persons who inject drugs. In fact, 50%-90% of HIV-infected persons who use injection drugs are also infected with the hepatitis C virus. To learn more about co-infection, visit <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/resources/factsheets/hepatitis.htm>.

How long does the hepatitis C virus survive outside the body?

The hepatitis C virus can survive outside the body at room temperature, on environmental surfaces, for at least 16 hours but no longer than 4 days.

How should blood spills be cleaned from surfaces to make sure that hepatitis C virus is gone?

Any blood spills - including dried blood, which can still be infectious - should be cleaned using a dilution of one part household bleach to 10 parts water. Gloves should be worn when cleaning up blood spills.

What is the difference between hepatitis A, hepatitis B and hepatitis C?

Hepatitis A, B, and C are diseases that cause inflammation of the liver, but are caused by three different viruses. Although each can cause similar symptoms, they spread differently and can affect the liver differently. Acute infection of all three typically causes flu-like illness that may or may not be accompanied by brown urine, tan or gray colored bowel movements and jaundice (yellowing of the whites of the eyes and skin). Hepatitis A manifests as an acute infection only. Both hepatitis B and C can begin as acute infections, but typically lead to chronic infection that requires treatment, and may last a lifetime with complications such as liver failure or cancer. It is extremely important that you seek medical advice if you have hepatitis B or C. There are vaccines to prevent hepatitis A and B; however, there is not one for hepatitis C. If a person has been infected with one type of viral hepatitis in the past, it is still possible to get the other types if exposed to the virus.

Visit the following website for more information about the differences between hepatitis A, B and C.
<http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/Resources/Professionals/PDFs/ABCTable.pdf>

Where can I get more information?

- Your personal doctor
- Your local health department, listed in the telephone directory, or <http://www.ualhd.org/lhds.html>
- The Utah Department of Health, Bureau of Epidemiology, 801-538-6191
- CDC's website: <http://www.cdc.gov/hepatitis/C/cFAQ.htm>

UTAH DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
BUREAU OF EPIDEMIOLOGY
July 2012